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Wilderness in the United States

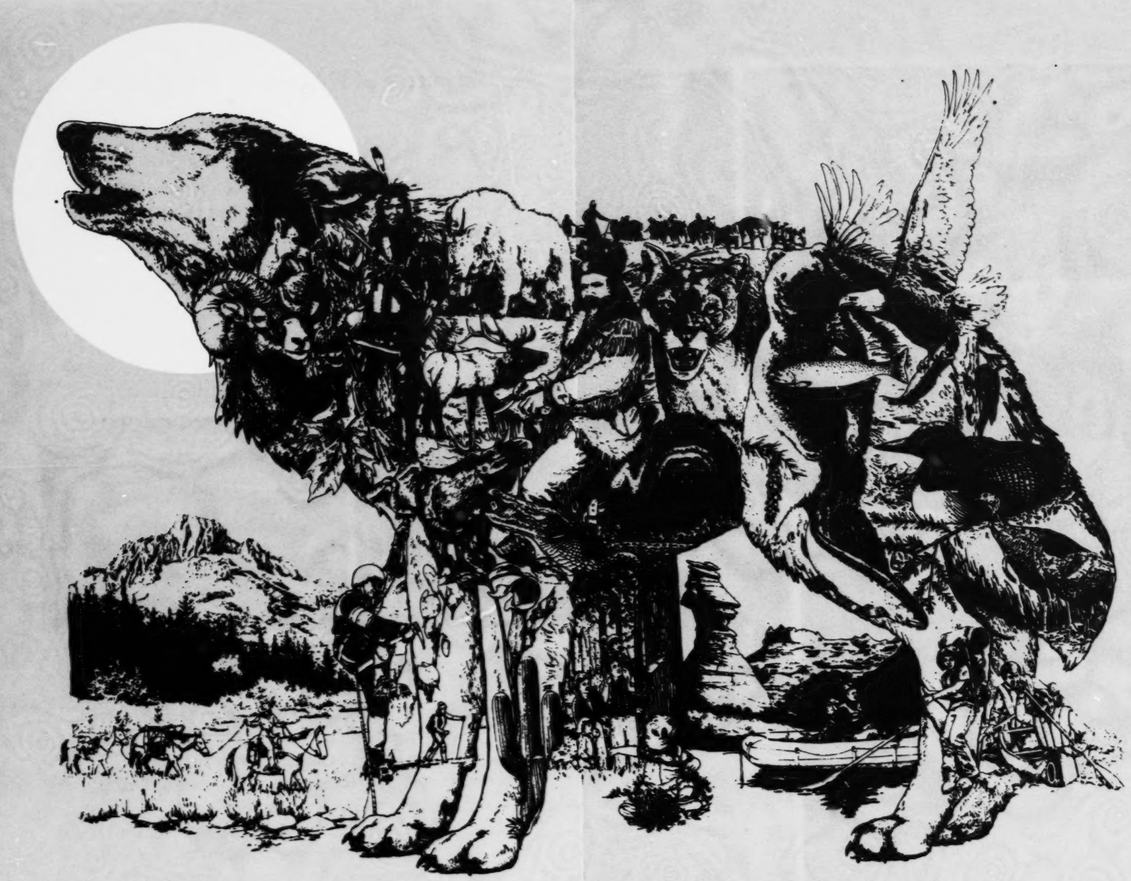
Wilderness is the America that was — wild land beyond the frontier that shaped the growth of the Nation and the character of its people. But after just 200 years, the American frontier (except for Alaska) had virtually disappeared. Railroads crisscrossed the continent, inviting settlement and industry. The rush for lands and resources led to almost unchecked development.

The late 1800's marked a turning point in the management of America's natural resources. Selected public lands were protected from uncontrolled development and reserved to benefit the Nation as a whole. The establishment of the world's first National Park at Yellowstone in 1872 exemplified this change. The first allocation of public land specifically for protecting wilderness values was made in the Gila National Forest of New Mexico in 1924. Forty years later, the desire to protect the Nation's wilderness resource was formalized with passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964.

The Wilderness Act

This landmark conservation legislation established for the American people an enduring resource of wilderness. The Act defined wilderness as areas that:

- Are affected primarily by the forces of nature, where man is a visitor who does not remain.
- Possess outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.
- Are undeveloped, federally owned, and generally over 5,000 acres (2,020 hectares) in size.
- Are protected and managed so as to allow natural ecological processes to operate freely.
- May contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.
- Are formally designated by Congress as wilderness.



Growth of the Wilderness System

Although passage of the Wilderness Act designated 54 wildernesses totaling about 9 million acres (4 million hectares), most wilderness areas have been established since 1964. Today the National Wilderness Preservation System contains over 90 million acres (36 million hectares) of designated wilderness at 474 locations. Additional areas are under study and may be recommended to Congress as wilderness.

Objectives of Wilderness Management

Management objectives for the National Wilderness Preservation System are drawn from the Wilderness Act. These objectives include:

- To perpetuate for present and future generations a long-lasting system of high-quality wilderness that represents natural ecosystems.
- To provide opportunities for public use and enjoyment of the wilderness resource.
- To allow plants and animals indigenous to the area to develop through natural processes.
- To maintain watersheds and airsheds in a healthy condition.
- To protect threatened or endangered plant and animal species.
- To maintain the primitive character of wilderness as a benchmark for ecological studies.

Why Manage Wilderness?

When the Wilderness Act was passed, many assumed that simply designating an area as wilderness would assure its preservation. Today, however, steadily increasing use and other human influences are impacting wilderness qualities. Preserving these qualities can best be ensured through the careful management of the wilderness resource. Managing wilderness includes:

- Providing public education on wilderness values and methods to minimize user impacts.
- Favoring wilderness-dependent activities in management decisions.
- Generally not allowing permanent structures or installations, such as campgrounds, buildings, or radio antennas. Primitive public-use cabins may be provided in Alaska.
- Managing visitor use to protect the wilderness resource. For example, trails may be provided or limits placed on party size or camping areas to protect soil, water, and biological resources, and to distribute visitors.
- Prohibiting the use of motor vehicles, mechanical transport, and motorized equipment except in emergencies. Permanent or temporary roads are not permitted.
- Excluding timber harvesting.
- Allowing fires to burn under preplanned prescribed conditions. This includes both naturally occurring fires and those ignited by wilderness managers.

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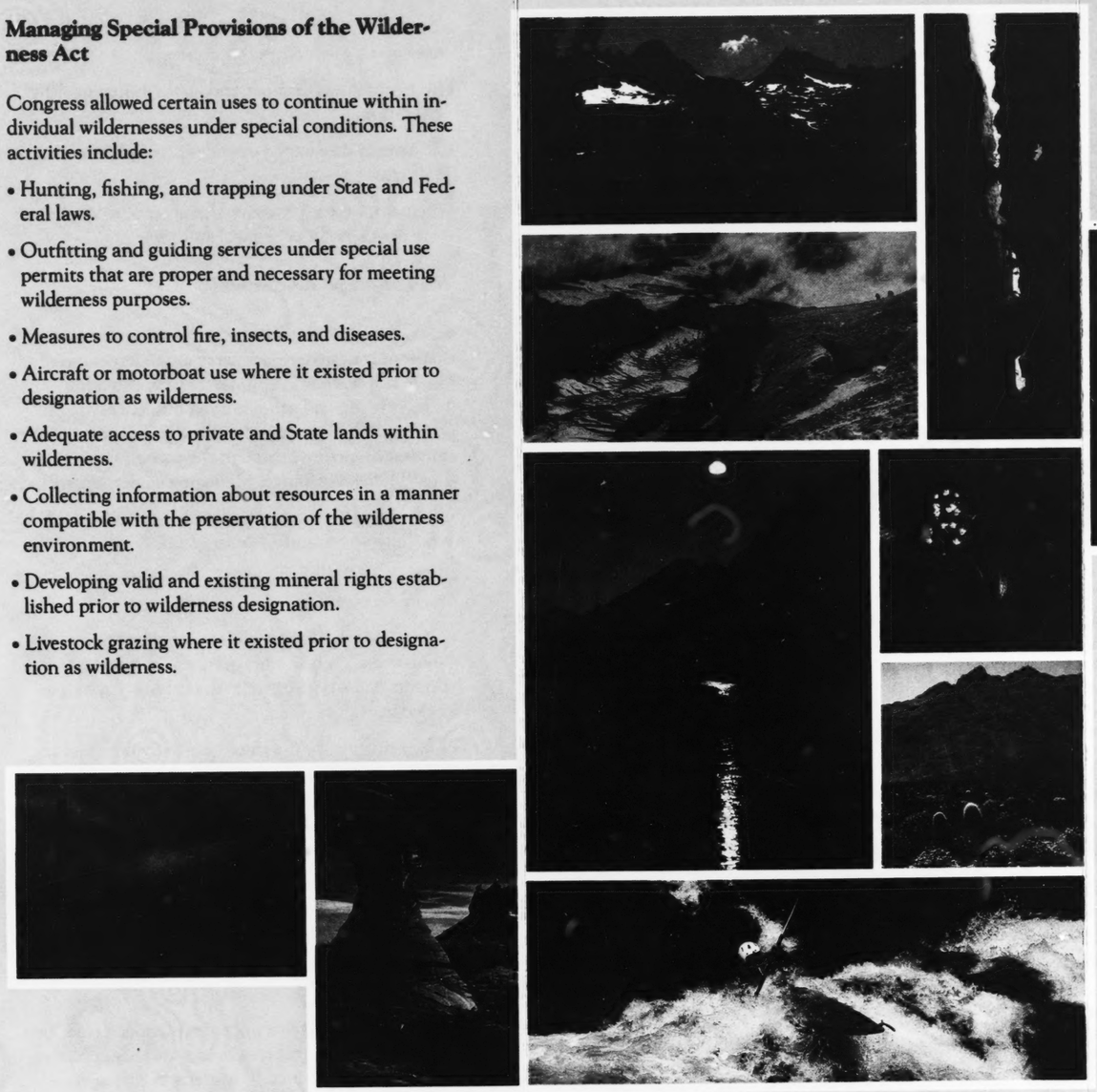
Managing Special Provisions of the Wilderness Act

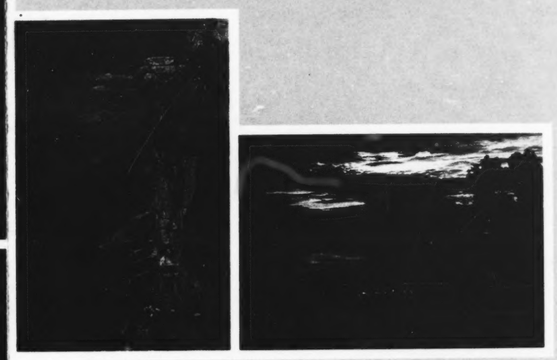
Congress allowed certain uses to continue within individual wildernesses under special conditions. These activities include:

- Hunting, fishing, and trapping under State and Federal laws.
- Outfitting and guiding services under special use permits that are proper and necessary for meeting wilderness purposes.
- Measures to control fire, insects, and diseases.
- Aircraft or motorboat use where it existed prior to designation as wilderness.
- Adequate access to private and State lands within wilderness.
- Collecting information about resources in a manner compatible with the preservation of the wilderness environment.
- Developing valid and existing mineral rights established prior to wilderness designation.
- Livestock grazing where it existed prior to designation as wilderness.



The Future of Wilderness in the United States

Wilderness is a unique and vital resource. With your help, the wilderness resource can be managed to ensure that its unique character and values remain dominant and enduring.



September 3, 1989 marks the 25th Anniversary of the establishment of the National Wilderness Preservation System. To celebrate, the Federal agencies responsible for managing wilderness are joining concerned private organizations to promote an increased awareness of our wilderness heritage. In teaching the values of wilderness, we hope to instill a sense of land stewardship and responsibility with all people. Only with the involvement of those who value wilderness can we continue to preserve it as an enduring resource.

WILDERNESS
1964 • TWENTY-FIVE YEARS • 1989

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

U.S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service • National Park Service
Bureau of Land Management

1989

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